Leisure, Consumption, and the Speed Up of Time in the United States

Characterizing leisure in the United States is extremely difficult given the amount of diversity among Americans. Religion, geography, race and ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientations, family configurations, and generational differences all play a role in shaping Americans’ leisure and lifestyle preferences. It seems to me, however, that there are two interrelated facets of American culture that few people living in the United States can ignore or from which they can escape: consumption and the speed up of time. As I will show in this chapter, these two social facts dominate Americans’ lives and have an inexorable influence on leisure time and leisure choices. It is important to note
that many of my observations are biased toward more affluent Americans. Nevertheless, consumption and busyness are hallmarks of the United States, and few Americans are immune to their influence.

Before proceeding, I will share a few personal points of view. First, I believe that Americans’ proclivity to consumption and busyness undermines their ability to reap more fully the benefits of leisure. Among other things, leisure provides a context for personal and spiritual growth, finding and nurturing community, creative expression, and rest and relaxation. At its best, leisure helps people slow down, be playful, and get in touch with their inner spirit and the natural world. For many Americans, however, leisure is frenetic and a context for displaying wealth and one’s social position. A preoccupation with consumer goods, status, and busyness undermines Americans’ ability to live simply and enjoy the peace and quiet that many leisure scholars associate with leisure in the classical sense of the term (Pieper, 1952).

Second, there seems little question that Americans’ lifestyles have had a deleterious impact on the planet’s health and natural resources. Americans consume far more natural resources and live less sustainably than any other people in the world (Scheer & Moss, 2012). Americans have contributed in great measure to global warming; the thinning of the planet’s ozone layer; the dumping of toxic wastes into our oceans, lakes and rivers; deforestation; and the decline of species diversity. It seems to me that the long-term health of the planet will require Americans (and others) to learn how to enjoy their leisure time without purchasing and using a plethora of goods and services.

The Growth Imperative and Consumption

I do not think it is possible to fully comprehend leisure in the United States without first recognizing the importance that Americans assign to economic growth and its effect on consumption. Politicians and business leaders alike espouse the desirability of sustained economic growth and a growth imperative is regarded as essential to job creation, human progress, and a community’s well-being (Antonio, 2013; Glover, 2011; Molotch, 1976). Economic growth is so valued among Americans that, according to Molotch and Logan (1984), many community leaders often do not question the social worth or ecological impact of an industry as long it generates jobs and wealth: “They invite capital to make anything—whether bombs or buttons, tampons or tanks—in their own back yards” (p. 484). Economic growth remains an important ideological cornerstone in American politics and the American way of life, and critics of growth are frequently denounced as anti-business and un-American.

The growth imperative in the United States has spurred the advance of a voracious consumer culture. Americans are fixated on buying goods and experiences, and the U.S. is probably the most consumer-oriented society in the history of the planet (Schor, 2004). Many Americans seem content to work long hours and forgo vacation days to buy things and to maintain a desired lifestyle. It was not always this way. In the middle of the 20th century, some scholars and politicians predicted that increased productivity and economic growth would lead to significant gains in leisure time among Americans (Hunnicutt, 1988). According to Schor (1991), they projected that by the end of the 20th century, “we could have either a 22-hour work week, a six-month work year, or a standard retirement age of thirty-eight” (p. 4). Today the growth imperative is so strong that few American employers seriously consider granting their employees more leisure time. Moreover, quite a few Americans who hold full-time jobs are expected by their employers to work long hours and not use all the vacation time they are legally permitted (Dickey, 2015).

Simultaneously, while many Americans desire more leisure time (de Graaf & Batker, 2011), little evidence suggests they would accept a large increase in free time if it meant altering their lifestyles significantly and abandoning consumption. Indeed, consumption pervades Americans’ leisure and lifestyles and, according to Ritzer (2010), has taken on something of a religious or sacred quality. He noted that great “cathedrals of consumption” (e.g., shopping malls, modern sport stadiums, Disneyland, themed restaurants) entice people to visit and practice their “consumer religion” (p. 7). Americans are awash in consumer goods and services. Many affluent Americans, for example, are able to buy large, spacious homes that include the latest and most expensive entertainment systems, designer clothes and apparel, choice foods and spirits, and the newest in electronic gadgetry. Simultaneously, many Americans can afford to vacation in exotic locations, maintain memberships in country clubs and health spas, and purchase season tickets to support their favorite college and/or professional sports teams.

Consumption and Status Seeking

For the vast majority of Americans, subsistence needs are easily met, which means that a great deal of what Americans consume can be explained in terms of their need to keep up appearances. I will develop this assertion using ideas put forward by Thorstein Veblen (1899) in his classic, The Theory of the Leisure Class. Veblen’s ideas about status seeking constitute an important archetype for understanding leisure in contemporary America (Scott, 2010, 2013). A central point of The Theory of the Leisure Class is that people are hardwired to elevate their social position in the eyes of their peers. Veblen used the term pecuniary emulation to describe a deep-seated motive that compels people to seek favorable comparisons (or simply status) relative to others. An important method by which Americans strive for status is by engaging in what Veblen referred to as conspicuous consumption. This means that goods and services are purchased and displayed to show off one’s wealth and social position. Although many of the goods and services that Americans purchase have practical value and provide them comfort, Veblen asserted that many of these same purchases signify prowess, status, and prestige. This expectation helps explains the attraction of designer clothes and high-end recreation equipment; securing the services of a personal nutritionist, pet groomer, and nanny; and vacationing at a five-star resort. These and other luxury goods and services help Americans advertise their social position to both their peers and social inferiors.

The goods and services that Americans routinely consume have a taken-for-granted quality. Most Americans are not particularly introspective about their consumer habits and are not fully aware that they engage in conspicuous consumption. In fact, many Americans probably regard the goods and services they consume as necessities rather than luxuries. As Veblen (1899) observed, once people achieve a particular standard of living, that standard takes on the form of habit and they are reluctant to recede from it. This point of view is fueled by a certainty that a good life in the United States is dependent on buying and sur-
and stressed because they lack enough time in the day to accomplish all the things they value. Indeed, many Americans make purchases on a whole range of luxury products and services as if their lives depended on them. Americans’ opinions about fashion and conspicuous consumption are molded early in life and pretty well established by the time they enter adulthood. Schor (2004) noted that sophisticated marketing techniques have filtered down to young people resulting in becoming “repositories of consumer knowledge and awareness” (p. 11). She further noted that children’s social worlds “are increasingly constructed around consuming, as brands and products have come to determine who is ‘in’ or ‘out,’” who is hot or not, who deserves to have friends, or social status” (p. 11). Many Americans today grow up feeling entitled to myriad goods, services, and opportunities that were scarcely available to previous generations of Americans. As I have noted elsewhere (Scott, 2010), my college students accept uncritically that they personally own pickup trucks, personal computers, and cell phones. They also do not find it extraordinary that they have credit cards in their own names, live in luxury condominiums, and have enough money to buy expensive lattes at Starbucks. Many of them also own pedigreed dogs, belong to private fitness clubs, pay to have manicures, and travel out of state during spring break. I am sure my students would feel a hardship if they were to go through college with less.

Few Americans appear content with their current goods and services. Veblen (1899) asserted that standards of emulation are continually evolving, which gives rise to gradual dissatisfaction with one's current lifestyle: “But as fast as a person makes new acquisitions, and becomes accustomed to the resulting new standard of wealth, the new standard forthwith ceases to afford appreciably great satisfaction than the earlier standard did” (p. 31). Thus, my college students have graduated to more luxurious automobiles, homes, entertainment systems, golf clubs, and vacation destinations, and now deprecate the very goods and services they were once loath to live without.

Schor (1991) noted that American workers in 1990 were able to reproduce the 1948 standard of living in half the time. She concluded Americans could work as little as 20 hours per week and still maintain the same standard of living they had just a few generations ago. She observed, however, that Americans’ lifestyles are oriented to an “insidious cycle of work and spend” (p. 127). The simple truth is that Americans prefer goods and services over leisure in contemporary America. Here I turn my attention to a second set of ideas that provide insight into the leisure of Americans, the speed up of time. A hallmark of the United States is the fast pace of everyday life. Indeed, busyness describes the lives of many Americans and has “burrowed its way into our economic life, our social and cultural life, and even our personal and religious life” (p. 127). Over the last 30 years, technological innovations associated with computers have reduced the amount of time to complete routine tasks, and thereby have accelerated Americans’ standards regarding timeliness. Americans have come to expect speedy results in virtually everything, including the internet and email, shopping, exercise regimens, cooking, airline travel, postal services, and even relationships. When confronted with long lines or delays, Americans often become anxious and feel time slipping away.

Busyness and the Speed Up of Time

So far I have argued that consumption and status seeking are integral to understanding leisure in contemporary America. Here I turn my attention to a second set of ideas that provide insight into the leisure of Americans, the speed up of time. A hallmark of the United States is the fast pace of everyday life. Indeed, busyness describes the lives of many Americans and has become a powerful cultural expectation (Schulte, 2014). Being busy is a source of pride and virtue and its opposite—idleness or worse, laziness—is both suspect and reprehensible. Busyness, however, has exacted a cost as Americans often feel overwhelmed and stressed because they lack enough time in the day to accomplish all the things they would like to do. As I will show, the speed up of time results in Americans pursuing leisure with an eye to maximizing the yield on time.

Before proceeding, it is important to identify factors that have fueled the speed up of time in the U.S. Perhaps the most important factor is linked to Americans’ standards of living and unquenchable material appetites. As I noted above, few Americans regard the goods and services they have as sufficient. The doctrine “more is better, bigger is better, and new is better” rings true for many Americans. All of this puts a strain on leisure because the more goods and services purchased, the more demand on time to consume them. As Staffan Linder (1970) noted astutely in his classic, The Harried Leisure Class, consumption takes time. The more goods and services Americans purchase, the more problematic it has become for them to devote sufficient time to enjoy them all. Consumption and busyness are, indeed, closely connected.

Another related factor is that Americans have witnessed a proliferation of technology that has increased the amount of available information and the speed with which information is disseminated. The Internet and cable television, in particular, bombard Americans with news from across the globe and an avalanche of choices about how they can spend their time and money. Although all this information has made Americans more cognizant of issues worldwide, many of them feel overwhelmed with the quantity of information they inevitably encounter. Gleick (1999) captured this sentiment in a book entitled Faster. He observed wryly that the “information Age does not always mean information in our brains…We sometimes feel that it means information whistling by our ears at light speed, too fast to be absorbed” (p. 87). Being a well-informed citizen and consumer in contemporary America requires an increasing investment in time and energy.

A third factor that has contributed to the speed up of time is Americans’ penchant for maximizing efficiency. Rifkin (1987) argued that efficiency is a dominant value in the United States and has “burrowed its way into our economic life, our social and cultural life, and even our personal and religious life” (p. 127). Over the last 30 years, technological innovations associated with computers have reduced the amount of time to complete routine tasks, and thereby have accelerated Americans’ standards regarding timeliness. Americans have come to expect speedy results in virtually everything, including the internet and email, shopping, exercise regimens, cooking, airline travel, postal services, and even relationships. When confronted with long lines or delays, Americans often become anxious and feel time slipping away.

Finally, the speed up of time in the United States stems from the fact that the amount of leisure time over the last few decades has changed little. Throughout most of the 20th century, Americans as a whole did, in fact, observe an increase in leisure time and a reduced work week (Aguiar & Hurst, 2006; de Graaf, 1962; Robinson & Godfrey, 1997). In the latter part of the century and into the 21st century, gains in leisure time stalled. According to statistics reported in the American Time Use Survey, Americans spent on average 5.3 hours daily in leisure and sports in 2014. This statistic is nearly identical to the average reported in the 2004 survey (5.2 hours). Schor (1991) reported that Americans who held full-time jobs actually experienced an erosion of leisure time in the latter part of the 20th century. She attributed decreased leisure to a longer work week, an increase in commuting time, and a decrease in paid time off. Schor concluded that Americans were actually working harder than they had been in previous decades. Many Americans dream of a life of leisure, and a
life without the constant pressure of work and obligations. This dream seems elusive. It is fair to say that leisure time has not kept pace with its own increasing demands.

Now I turn my attention to how busyness and the speed up of time have impacted Americans' leisure. In a general sense, the speed up of time has resulted in Americans engaging in what Linder (1970) referred to as accelerated consumption. More simply, when confronted with busyness, Americans seek to increase the yield on leisure time by making it more productive and efficient. Americans do this in at least three ways.

One way Americans' accelerate consumption is by engaging in what Linder (1970) referred to as goods-intensive behavior. While goods have value because they provide status, they increase the yield on time because they are thought to enhance leisure time. Technological gadgets that can be manipulated are particularly useful and have become basic features to how Americans spend their leisure time. Smartphones, for example, can be used to take photographs or videos of a night out, which can then be shared with others via texting and social networking. Likewise, smart televisions allow users to stream movies, access cable shows, and play online games on large plasma screens. Outdoor recreation activities can be made more productive by incorporating high-end equipment and technology including spotting scopes, GPS trackers, solar-powered tents, metal detectors, solar phone chargers, and portable propane smokers. These and other leisure objects are valued by Americans because they are believed to make leisure activities more productive and increase the yield on leisure time.

A second way people seek to maximize the yield on leisure is by engaging in what Linder (1970) called simultaneous consumption. As the name indicates, this is "when a consumer tries to enjoy more than one consumption item at a time" (p. 79). Several examples from everyday America indicate that this form of accelerated consumption is commonly practiced. Americans routinely exercise at gymnasiums using expensive equipment while simultaneously watching television or reading. The enjoyment of a family visit to the zoo can be enhanced by taking photographs and/or sending text messages to family and friends. I know few Americans who actually listen to music without doing other things concurrently, including cooking, socializing, driving, and running. Simultaneous consumption is integral to the staging of mass sporting events. As I have noted elsewhere (Scott, 2013), "Organizers... incorporate music and dance demonstrations, giveaways, contests and a variety of other ancillary activities that help attendees feel they are getting the most from their participation" (p. 114).

Linder (1970) predicted that leisure activities that facilitate simultaneous consumption are likely to rise in popularity relative to pastimes that do not. The ubiquity of television in the U.S. supports this premise. More than half of all Americans' leisure time in 2014 was spent watching television (American Time Use Survey, 2014). The pervasiveness of television in America stems from the fact that it requires relatively low attention and allows users to do other things simultaneously. While watching television, Americans are able to "dress, shave, eat meals, smoke, knit, fold laundry, do crossword puzzles, talk on the telephone, surf the Internet, send text messages, and spend 'quality time' with friends and family" (Scott, 2013, p. 114).

The decline of a popular American card game, contract bridge, may be related to the speed up of time. I have noted elsewhere (Scott, 1991), the number of bridge players in the United States began decreasing (precipitously) after the 1950s. The decline is largely due to the baby boom and subsequent generations not learning or playing the game. My conclusion was that the game is not goods-intensive, requires a long time to learn and master, and does not lend itself to simultaneous consumption. Today, contract bridge is played primarily by older adults who learned how to play the game decades ago when they were in their formative years.

Finally, busyness results in Americans speeding up the time it takes to engage in leisure activities (Rifkin, 1987; Robinson & Godbey, 1997). This behavior could entail pursuing leisure activities for a shorter duration. For example, fast food restaurants and microwave dinners have reduced the time it takes Americans to prepare and consume a meal. Organized and recreational sports have imposed time limits on play, which has decreased the amount of time it takes to watch or play a game. A company called getAbstract© helps subscribers become better educated by offering five-page summaries of books, which can be read in 10 minutes. The summaries are marketed as the fastest way to expand your business knowledge.

As I have noted elsewhere (Scott, 2013), technology has played a significant role in the speed up of leisure in the United States. Two decades ago, compact disc players all but eclipsed record players and cassette players as vehicles for listening to music. Whereas older entertainment systems required frequent album or tape changes, compact disc players could be preprogrammed in ways that eliminated the time it took to change music selections. Portable media players today are now making compact disc players seem old-fashioned. Music selections are available literally at one's finger tips and have reduced the time it takes to consume music. Similar technological advancements have reduced the time it takes to watch television shows and movies. Video cassette recorders (VCRs) allowed people to tape television shows and watch them in a fraction of the time by fast forwarding through commercials. DVDs and digital streaming have now eclipsed VCRs because of their ability to speed up the time it takes to download desired television shows and movies.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have sought to explain Americans' leisure in terms of consumption and the speed-up of time. These two facts are so pervasive that they influence Americans irrespective of their gender, race and ethnicity, social class, age, sexual orientation, and religion. There is such a close connection between leisure and consumption in the United States that I wonder whether many of my fellow Americans have the capability to fully enjoy their leisure time without goods and services. I also wonder whether they have the ability to savor experiences and enjoy the simplicity of quiet contemplation. There is no indication, however, that Americans are inclined to change their goods-intensive leisure behavior. Americans' proclivities to keep up appearances, and time pressures that spur them to maximize the yield on free time, means that consumption and leisure in the United will continue to be inexorably linked. As I noted in my introduction, Americans' preoccupation with status and busyness compromises their ability to reap more fully the benefits of leisure. It also has devastating impacts on the health of our planet.
References


